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Wave of Unrest Presents Serious Threat to Syria's Assad

180 Killed in Riots In Aleppo in Month

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DAMASCUS, Syria — A wave of unrest has swept across northern Syria and posed the most serious threat to the government of President Hafez Assad since he came to power in a coup d'etat in 1970.

Though the regime remains firmly in control, the rioting in Aleppo, Hama and other Syrian cities is symptomatic of widespread popular dissatisfaction which, ironically, comes after the longest period of political stability since independence from France in 1946.

Some say it also has been the most productive period in Syria's postwar history despite the 1973 war with Israel and the refusal of Damascus to join the Camp David peace process.

The rioting has been spurred in part by the Syrians' frustration with widespread official corruption, unrealistic economic policies and a 30 percent annual inflation rate.

A more fundamental cause is the deep uneasiness among the country's 70 percent Sunni Moslem population after 10 years of domination by the Alawites, a schismatic Moslem sect that Assad, senior members of the ruling Baath party and the military belong to. The Alawites make up about 12 percent of the population.

There is a danger that the present political dissatisfaction could erupt into sectarian strife such as that in bordering Lebanon.

The Aleppo rioting, which began March 11, has left 180 people dead.

The city's *souk* (bazaar) already had closed in protest against the government's rigid import policies that had placed Syria's thousands of small-shopkeepers in a tight financial squeeze.

An ultraorthodox religious association had put up posters calling for a general strike against the sectarian Assad regime. According to one account, crowds of teen-agers then appeared in the streets, while armed gunmen burst into classrooms at Aleppo University and shot out the windows.

In the rioting and arson that followed, scores were killed. Assad subsequently dispatched 10,000 troops of his third armored division to the city of 800,000 where they encamped on the outskirts of Aleppo. Their presence had a sobering effect on the city. The bazaar reopened, and life seemed to return to normal.

In the meantime, there were similar outbreaks in the northern towns of Hama, an industrial center, Deir-ez-Zur, Idlib and Maarat Ann-Numan, where there is a large army barracks.

There is some evidence that Assad was unaware of how serious dissatisfaction had become and was deeply shocked by the rioting.

One diplomatic source in Damascus believes this may, in part, explain his passionate rhetoric in assigning the blame to Syria's external enemies and mentioned the U.S. CIA by name. The outbursts were uncharacteristic of Assad, known for his quiet demeanor and general reticence.

Assad may also have realized that he had made a mistake in constantly blaming the ultraorthodox Moslem brotherhood for the political assassinations that have plagued Syria for the past two years.

Assad last month suddenly stopped blaming the brotherhood as an organization.

But after 10 years in power, Assad, who so far has turned out to be a remarkably astute Arab leader, must deal with a troubled economy, a confrontation with Israel that offers little hope for solution, and nine million Syrians who are restive after a decade of tight control.